

Through Artist's Eyes

Story by Beth Reece

Art by MSG Henrietta M. Snowden (Ret.)



"Taking the Point"



MSG Henrietta M. Snowden (Ret.) was the Army's first female combat artist. She used watercolor and color pencils to share with others her appreciation for soldiers' dedication.

Paul Disney

Henrietta M. Snowden can freeze time. And during her tenure as the Army's official artist, it was a talent she used to pay creative testimony to soldiers' experiences in both peace and war.

"My art is influenced by a deep appreciation for soldiers. They are so committed in all they do. I hope my paintings inspire others to value soldiers' dedication," said Snowden, who until her retirement last month was assigned to the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C.

Uniformed artists began documenting U.S. military missions during World War I, after the British had already discovered that using military artists aided morale. "Plus, it was a good form of advertisement," said CMH art curator Renée Klish.

CMH selects one new artist every three years to record soldiers' endeavors through various media. Snowden favors watercolor and colored pencils, and occasionally adds oil pastel or ink for highlights and dimension.



"Waiting to go to War, 2002"



"Waiting to Phone Home"

The Whole Story

Like a reporter, Snowden gathered soldiers' stories by following them on deployments, during field exercises and in garrison environments. In early 2000 she spent 30 days lugging camera gear and sketchbooks around Kosovo before committing brush and ink to one of her first CMH projects, titled the "Kosovo Collection," which can be viewed at www.army.mil/cmh-pg/art/Snowden/kosovo.htm.

"I jumped on every available convoy so I could talk with soldiers about their parts of the mission," Snowden said. She came home with 10 rolls of film, a stack of sketches and a diary of her observations.



"South of Ch'orwon"



"The General in the Desert"



"An Army of One"

"This is how I develop the story that will come through in my art," she said. "I actually get to see the loneliness that soldiers sometimes experience, as well as their hard work, teamwork and pride. It inspires me."

A painting titled "Basic Training" is among Snowden's latest works. Created in honor of women in uniform, it shows a young recruit low-crawling through barbed wire with a rifle in her arms.

"You can see the determination in her eyes, even though she's obviously struggling," Snowden said, explaining



"Peacekeeper"



"Early Morning Light"

how the painting focuses on the girl's eyes. "I knew that if I had the eyes right, everything else would fall into place."

While many soldiers deployed to Saudi Arabia in early 1991 for Operation Desert Storm, Snowden worked as a graphics manager for the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. Wanting to contribute to the war, she delved through the photos that arrived daily from combat photographers in the war zone. An overexposed image of GEN Colin Powell caught her attention.

"The photograph was so incredible. To me, it depicted what the desert must have been like — red hot. I wanted to convey this overexposed heat in my painting," she said.

The finished product shows Powell grimacing from light so bright that his image fades off the canvas. CMH officials liked it so much, they added it to their permanent Army art collection and invited Snowden to join a team of artists that would complete artworks depicting soldiers returning home from Operation Desert Storm.

Snowden believes art offers a greater freedom of expression than photography. Artists, she said, have the liberty to expand a photograph's emotion through their choices of medium, color, brush stroke and overall composition.

"The background I paint may not have been in the original photograph, for example. Or I may choose to focus on just one part of the photograph," she said. "A photographer can capture only what occurs at a specific moment,



"Basic Training"



Secure the firing line.



"New York Welcome"

but an artist continues to define that moment."



Most artists fear criticism and censorship, but Snowden's supervisors supported her desire to project the truth. Even the blood she painted in some of her Kosovo works went unchallenged, she said.

"I wasn't sure how that would be received, though blood was a very real element of the deployment," she said. "That everyone was supportive says a lot about the value placed on the program."

"Still, everyone is an art critic," she added.

"There's always going to

be somebody who asks, 'Where's the rest of the story?' or 'When are you going to finish this?'" Refusing to let bad feedback block her creative flow, Snowden tells critics that her creations are products of personal perception.

Army artists are referred to as multimedia illustrators by occupational specialty. They're trained to develop and enhance graphic presentations. Because commanders are sometimes unaware of illustrators' capabilities, the artists are occasionally pushed aside or underused in auxiliary jobs, Snowden said.

"Most illustrators extend their artistic abilities to the units they support, such as designing T-shirts for a unit run, or a caricature for a hail and farewell," she said. "This is the sort of job that requires soldiers to find their own opportunities, to seek ways they can contribute — even if it means working on their own time."

The titles "soldier" and "artist" may seem contradictory to some. But if an artist's creativity is influenced by experience, who better to paint soldiers than a soldier, Snowden said.

"I was judged by the same standards and went through the same training as other soldiers, so I understood what they do and how they feel. I had an insider's view," she said.

Snowden retired in October after 20 years of illustrating and painting for the Army. In the final phase of her career, she said, her artistic "flow" was just beginning to run smooth and constant. But a new artist, she said, will

help further enrich the collective image of the Army's past.

"Henrietta should be very, very proud of her art," Klish said. "It will help us always remember where the Army has been." □

CMH owns more than 15,000 historical artworks, some of which can be viewed at www.army.mil/cmh-pg/.